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ABSTRACT

Noting that high achieving Indiana high school students can provide important insights into the educational system in the state, this study examined the opinions of recipients of Ameritchieve recognition, National Merit finalists, African-American students who were National Achievement finalists, and national Hispanic Scholar finalists, all from within a 75-mile radius of Indianapolis. A survey regarding educational priorities in Indiana was sent to 224 central Indiana honorees. A total of 75 surveys were returned for a response rate of 33 percent. Key findings indicated that high achievers credited good teachers as the most important factor in the success they have enjoyed. They also identified poor teachers as the key detractor in quality education. Further, they listed "attracting and retaining future teachers" as the first option they would recommend for policymakers concerned with educational quality. Only half the students had ever considered becoming a teacher, and only 3 of the 75 identified teaching as a specific career goal. Reasons identified for teacher shortages included the need for better pay and more benefits, more freedom from the stress of regulations and standards, and more respect and prestige. Other significant factors in the students' success were the high educational levels of their parents and their exposure to academic programs for gifted students. Of the 39 students who had made a decision about which college they would attend, 46 percent selected colleges or universities outside Indiana. (Appended is a list of the Ameritchieve committee members.) (KB)

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AN ACCENT ON TOMORROW'S LEADERS

Setting Educational Priorities: High Achievers Speak Out

White Paper

AMERITCHIEVE **Forum**
Marian College
Indianapolis, Indiana
April 22, 2001

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SETTING EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES:

HIGH ACHIEVERS SPEAK OUT

Introduction

An informal survey of 75 Central Indiana high school seniors who rank among the nation's merit scholars reveals several key insights about issues facing Indiana's educational system. From a large list of possible policy initiatives, these academic superstars concentrate with laser-like focus on one key issue affecting quality education in Indiana: teachers. Teachers at once represent the most important factor in the success of these nationally ranked scholars and simultaneously reflect the biggest detractor to quality. This anomaly is further revealed in the merit award-winners' views about choosing teaching as a profession for themselves, and in other recommendations about how to improve K-12 education for Hoosiers.

The annual survey, now in its third year, springs from the concerns of a group of Indiana educators and citizens who believe this pool of high-achieving students has important viewpoints about what Indiana can do to improve its overall educational attainment. Despite significant efforts in the recent past to pull out of the bottom ranks, Indiana still has a long way to go in achieving respectable scores in educational attainment. (17.1 percent of Indianans have a bachelor's degree or better, compared with the national average of 25.6 percent) The relationship between the state's educational attainment and its economic development has been well-documented.[1]

This white paper documents the results of the 2001 survey of Central Indiana's high achievers and analyzes their stated opinions about the education they received and the priorities they would set for education in the future. Of the host of alternatives available, these students would concentrate on the attraction and retention of quality teachers as the single most critical dimension in priority-setting for Indiana.

The Survey

Indiana can be justly proud of the 224 students who are designated as this year's Ameritchieve recipients. These extraordinarily capable young men and women represent the very best that our educational system produces. In some cases, these students say student success is a prime consideration at their schools and they have benefited from an environment conducive to quality. In other instances, these scholars say they have had to battle to succeed in spite of school conditions that are less than stellar. In both situations, national merit scholars have viewpoints that are well-informed and instructive. The purpose of the survey is to glean these unique insights and share the wisdom these students offer.

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Recipients of Ameritchieve recognition are National Merit Finalists, African-American students who are National Achievement Finalists and National Hispanic Scholar Finalists from within a 75-mile radius of Indianapolis. While the criteria for each of the national awards vary, in general, recipients represent students who have scored at the highest levels on national PSAT examinations, have maintained outstanding academic records throughout high school, have received endorsements and recognition from their high school principals, have achieved follow-up SAT-I scores that confirm earlier qualifying test performance, and can be said to have the strongest records of academic accomplishment and ability among their classmates.

The 2001 study was prompted by the planning efforts for the Ameritchieve event, a combination recognition/reception/forum honoring Central Indiana students of national academic distinction. The event, to be held April 22, 2001, at Marian College in Indianapolis, is sponsored by Project E of the Christel DeHaan Family Foundation, Marian College, Marsh, Inc., a Marsh & McLennan Company, and the Lumina Foundation for Education. The event will include a forum on the topic of educational priorities in Indiana, and educational priorities will be the subject of essays the Ameritchieve recipients will author.

These National Merit Finalists are in demand, as colleges and universities across the country compete for these students to enter their freshman classes. By adding these students to their rosters, colleges hope to improve their institutional academic profiles. As representatives of the nation's high school intellectual elite, these students are truly competitive with the very brightest students.

With recognition comes money. Financial rewards often accompany the National Merit, Achievement and Scholar recognition, as finalists are eligible for scholarships from the respective national organizations and from private and institutional sources, as well. Several recipients report offers of significant scholarship and financial aid benefits. Some are receiving "full rides" for the payment of tuition and fees, room and board, and books and supplies – a status similar to full rides received by stellar athletes at athletically competitive institutions. Thus, these academic "blue chippers" have choices to make about institutions to attend. Similarly, institutions make conscious choices about recruiting and funding these academically eminent students. In Indiana, for example, only two universities rank among the top 86 institutions enrolling National Merit Scholars. Purdue University ranks 41st in the nation with 54 such scholars, and the University of Notre Dame 50th, with 45.[2]

Methodology

In March 2001, the Ameritchieve Committee requested that all honorees complete an informal survey aimed at capturing their thinking about educational priorities in Indiana. (A list of committee members is included in the Appendix) The committee designed the

survey and distributed it to all Central Indiana honorees along with invitations to attend the Ameritchieve event. High schools of the respective awards winners supplied the lists of qualified award recipients. Students responded to the survey in March 2001, and returned them to Ameritchieve for tabulation and analysis. Responses reflect current thinking about college-going, educational priorities, and student engagement in educational activities. A total of 75 surveys were returned out of 224 sent, for a response rate of 33 percent. Not all respondents answered all questions. Percentage scores may not always equal 100, due to rounding.

Statistically, this sample size does not permit a claim that the results are scientifically representative of the entire population of high-achieving students. At the same time, the results of the survey do provide anecdotal insight into this important group.

Results of the Survey

The 75 student-respondents will graduate in 2001 from public and private high schools in Central Indiana. Significant factors in their educational backgrounds correlate directly with their academic success. Among these factors are the educational levels of their parents, and their exposure to academic programs for gifted students.

Educational level of parents. Students were asked to identify the educational levels of their mothers and fathers. National studies demonstrate that parental educational attainment is a key factor in student academic success. Students whose parents have at least a bachelor's degree are much more likely to enroll in higher education immediately after high school than are the children of parents who have less education. National college enrollment rates of high school graduates the following October after high school range from nearly 50 percent for those whose parents had less than a high school education to 82 percent for those students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher.[3]

In the current sample, respondents identified very high levels of educational attainment for their parents:

	Mother (n:74)	Father (n:73)
No high school	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
High school graduate	8 (11%)	8 (11%)
Some college	8 (11%)	5 (07%)
College graduate	30 (41%)	20 (27%)
Post-college graduate	28 (38%)	40 (55%)

Taken as a whole, these respondents had parents with educational levels much higher than the national or Indiana averages. About 79 percent of the mothers and 82 percent of the fathers of the respondents had college-or-higher educational levels. Indiana ranks in the bottom tier of adult educational attainment, and thus the inter-generational dimension of attainment creates a difficult obstacle for the state to overcome as it seeks to improve its ranking.

Special Academic Programs. One significant factor in academic success is whether or not a student is exposed to programs that recognize and encourage intellectual talent Students were asked to report on whether they had enrolled in an honors program, a program for gifted and talented students, and/or an Advanced Placement course or courses. The results reveal a high level of participation in such programs among these students.

Enrolled in Honors Program?	Yes – 61 (81%)
Enrolled in Gifted and Talented Program?	Yes – 53 (71%)
Enrolled in Advanced Placement Course(s)?	Yes – 70 (93%)

Students were further asked to identify the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses they had taken. The number of courses taken ranged from 1 to 10, with a mean of 4.8 courses. Advanced Placement represents another important element in improving secondary education. AP courses are more academically rigorous, and the examinations are nationally normed. Students who complete such courses with a score of 3 or better (on a five-point scale) are eligible for college credit at the majority of American colleges and universities. These respondents, like other high school students fortunate enough to avail themselves of this program, are saving time and money by securing college credit before enrolling in a postsecondary institution. Not all high schools in Indiana participate in the AP program. Indeed, as a state, Indiana ranks below the national average in the number of its high school 11th and 12th graders achieving a 3 or better on the AP examinations.

Older siblings in college? Student respondents indicated the number of older brothers and sisters who were already enrolled in college. For a majority of respondents (37 out of 68 responding to this question) there are no older siblings in college, and thus these individuals represent the first child the family is sending to postsecondary education. A total of 20 students have one older sibling in college, and another 10 have two enrolled siblings.

Do you plan to attend college/Where? It should come as no surprise that 100 percent of the respondents intend to attend college. Students were asked to identify whether the college they plan to attend is located in state or out of state, and whether the intended institution is public or private. A total of 22 of the students (29 percent) are still "undecided," about school choice. This indecision is understandable, given that April is

the month that the most selective colleges deliver the majority of their acceptances and given the competition among institutions for these students, who enjoy the luxury of "shopping around" for better financial aid packages. In some cases, students are still waiting to hear from elite, highly selective institutions about the results of their applications for admission.

Of the 39 students who have made a decision, 18 (46 percent) have opted for colleges and universities located outside Indiana (compared with 12 percent statewide); 24 students (62 percent) have selected private institutions (compared with 24 percent statewide); and 15 (38 percent) have selected public universities. Inasmuch as many of these students could secure admission to practically any college, the proportion planning to go elsewhere does not seem unduly high. The college choices for the 39 students who had made a decision are reflected in the following table:

	In State (21)	Out of State (18)
Public:	Purdue University (5)	Georgia Institute of Technology (GA)
	Indiana University (4)	University of Illinois (IL)
	Ball State University (2)	University of Oklahoma (OK)
		Texas A & M University (TX)
Private:	Manchester College (2)	Cornell University (2) (NY)
	DePauw University	Mass Institute of Technology (2) (MA)
	Earlham College	Brigham Young University (UT)
	Franklin College	Case Western Reserve University (OH)
	Indiana Wesleyan Univ.	Cedarville University (OH)
	Univ. of Notre Dame	Dartmouth College (NH)
	Rose-Hulman Institute	Georgetown University (DC)
	St. Mary's College	Harvard University (MA)
	Valparaiso University	Messiah College (PA)
		Princeton University (NJ)
		Washington University in St. Louis (MO)
		Wittenberg University (OH)

Reasons for selecting college. Students were asked to list reasons for selecting the school of their choice. Since this was an open-ended question, there were multiple responses. Their responses reflected the following priorities:

Reason	Number of Responses
1. Quality/reputation/availability of a special academic program	34
2. Campus atmosphere/activities are conducive to my interests	14
3. Location of school	10
4. Financial assistance offered	9
5. Christian college, religious opportunities	7
6. Quality of the faculty	3
6. Reputation for quality of teaching	3
9. Reputation for success of graduates getting good jobs	2
9. Reputation for success of graduates gaining admission to graduate/professional schools	2
9. Has a lot of diversity	2
11. Study abroad opportunities	1
11. Small size of school	1

If you plan to attend an out-of-state institution, did you consider an Indiana school? A total of 36 students responded to this question, and 27 of them (75%) stated that they had considered attending an Indiana institution.

At this point, what career do you plan to pursue? As could be expected from a talented cross-section of achievers, academic interests are wide-ranging and ambitious. A talented group of students with the capabilities represented in this population are aware of the universe of career and professional options available to them. Responses are remarkable because of their breadth.

Intended Career, Numbers for Each Choice

Undecided (12)
Engineering (6)
Medicine (5)
Mechanical Engineering (4)
Research Scientist (3)
Anthropology (2)
Business (2)
Civil Engineer (2)
Journalism (2)
Law (2)
Music (2)
Architecture (1)
Arts Administration (1)
Astronaut (1)
Automotive Design (1)
Automotive Engineering (1)
Biochemistry (1)
Biomedical Research (1)
Biotechnology (1)
Broadcasting (1)
Broadcast Reporting (1)
Business Management (1)
Business Marketing (1)
Chemical Engineer (1)
Computer Engineer (1)
Computer Programming/Networking/Circuit Design (1)
Design Engineer (1)
Diplomatic Service (1)
Editing/Writing (1)
Elementary/Kindergarten Education (1)
Foreign Mission Work (1)
High Energy Particle Physics (1)
High School Math Teacher (1)
International Business (1)
International Health (1)
Law/International Relations (1)
Mathematics Education (1)
Microbiology (1)
Pharmaceutical Research (1)
Physics/Astronomy (1)
Publishing (1)
Telecommunications/Theatre (1)
Web Design (1)
Writing Fiction (1)

While many students are undecided about career choice, and others will no doubt change their minds over the next four years, these students have charted courses for themselves in keeping with their multiple talents.

Do you plan to attend a graduate school? High achievers are also long-term planners. Many of these respondents are thinking ahead to graduate and professional school four years out. The majority of respondents said they planned to attend graduate school. While a third remain undecided, only four of these students do not envision graduate school in their future.

Yes 44 (61%) No 4 (6%) Undecided 24 (33%)

In state or out of state for graduate school/work? Only 8 percent of respondents indicated a preference to attend graduate or professional school in Indiana. The rest were undecided or already assuming they would attend graduate school out of state.

Attend in state	5 (8%)
Attend out of state	27 (44%)
Undecided	30 (48%)

Similar numbers indicated they would probably work out of state.

Work in state	5 (7%)
Work out of state	34 (46%)
Undecided	35 (47%)

These findings are consistent with results revealed in two similar surveys conducted in 1999 and 2000 with similar student populations.[4] Indiana is a net exporter of graduates with postsecondary degrees. The Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute reported, in its graduate migration study in 1999, that 36.2 percent of Hoosiers leave the state after graduation, and 89.2 percent of non-residents leave.[5]

Have you ever considered a career as a teacher? Why or why not? In looking for a talent pool from which to draw potential teachers, National Merit Scholars would seem to be ideal candidates. Yet only about half of the respondents indicated that they had ever considered a career as a teacher.

Yes 36 (49%) No 38 (51%)

Among those respondents who had considered teaching as a career, their reasons were diverse:

Rank	Reasons Why, Numbers for Each Response
1.	Teaching offers one an opportunity to touch the lives of others. (6)
2.	It would be an exciting opportunity to challenge young minds. (5)
4.	I am good at teaching and would enjoy a service/social occupation. (4)
4.	I like to help people. (4)
4.	I love to work with children and help them develop skills. (4)
6.	Seeing people learn is fun. (3)
8.	Experience at college during school/summer has provided me an interest in teaching. (2)
8.	I think the most important job a person could have is teaching. (2)
8.	Because I've had wonderful teachers. (2)
8.	Only as a professor or other higher educator. (2)

Other:

Teachers have the greatest effect on the shaping of society. (1)
Because the subjects I love bring such joy to me that I would very much enjoy creating these feelings in others. (1)
I would enjoy both teaching and research. (1)
Both of my parents are teachers. (1)

Similarly, respondents indicated a variety of reasons why teaching did not appeal to them.

Rank	Reasons Why Not, Numbers for Each Response
1.	I just don't think it is right for me. (12)
2.	I don't have the patience to deal with disrespectful/ignorant/lazy students. (9)
3.	Too low paying; not enough money. (7)
4.	More interested in making discoveries myself than simply teaching about them. (4)
6.	My parents are teachers – not the kind of career that interests me. (2)
6.	I do not like the typical inflexibility of a school environment. (2)
6.	I can do more for society in other positions. (2)
6.	Teachers do not receive the respect they deserve from their students. (2)

Other:

I prefer to learn, not to teach. (1)
I do not see teaching as rewarding, fulfilling or useful. (1)
It is just not my expertise – I may teach later in life. (1)
Assisting friends to discover new ideas or concepts doesn't come naturally to me, so I wouldn't accomplish as much as a teacher as I would as a researcher. (1)

The prospect for growth is limited and a preference for working in an adult, business atmosphere. (1)
I don't want my success dependent upon the attitudes and successes of others. (1)
I don't want to spend my working days in a school atmosphere. (1)
I don't feel any opportunity for advancement. (1)
I would have a difficult time working with children. (1)
I abhor public speaking and don't work well trying to teach large groups. (1)
There are too many teachers who are undereducated in general, let alone in the fields that they are trying to teach. (1)
Teaching jobs seem extremely stressful and demanding with comparatively little reward. (1)

Assuming that good teachers are important to education, what three things would it take to attract successful students like you to a teaching career? Students responded with multiple and candid responses to the question about what it would take to attract them to teaching. In a sense, this question permits the development of a litany of changes required to attract (and retain) strong individuals to the teaching profession.

Rank	Things It Would Take, Numbers for Each Response
1.	Better pay and more benefits. (56)
2.	More freedom from the stress of regulations and standards. (21)
3.	More pupils who value education and their teachers. (18)
4.	More respect. (13)
5.	A more positive school environment. (10)
6.	More prestige, better image of a teaching career. (9)
7.	Smaller class size. (9)
8.	Being able to teach the subjects I love. (8)
9.	The promise of change in the educational system. (6)
10.	Opportunities to expand my knowledge and professional skills. (5)
11.	Better job security. (5)
12.	Better tools (supplies/resources) with which to teach. (4)
13.	Better preparation. (3)
14.	The best teachers are those who truly want to do it themselves. (3)
15.	Stricter rules regarding personal student behavior. (3)
16.	More active parents. (3)
17.	Higher demands on future teachers. (3)
18.	Rewards based on merit instead of seniority. (3)
19.	Nothing could make me want to teach. (2)
20.	Colleagues who would be as enthusiastic about teaching as I would be. (2)
21.	Free education for teachers. (2)

Other:

No year-round schooling. (1)
Not having to major in education, but in the content I would teach. (1)
Better school board. (1)
Great teachers will inspire students to also be teachers. (1)
Allow me to pray in class and mention the Bible. (1)
A position in administration as well as teaching. (1)
Earlier retirement age. (1)
Better discipline in schools. (1)
Absence of teachers' unions that work to keep incompetent teachers. (1)
Knowing that God had called me to teach. (1)

What are the most important factors that enhanced the quality of education in your high school? Merit scholars have clearly figured out what it takes to succeed in school. Understanding from them the key factors that are school-related provides insights into how to build quality. The list provides a "best practices" approach to quality enhancement. The overwhelming role of teachers emerges as the most critical factor.

Rank	Most Important Quality Factors, Numbers for Each Response
1.	Good teachers. (59). 79 percent of respondents listed this factor first. Descriptors used by respondents reveal the intensity of this item: "excellent," "involved," "inspirational," "enthusiastic," "qualified," "dedicated," "talented" and "knowledgeable." Representative comments included the following: "The teacher elite—that small group of teachers whom everybody knows care about the success of their students;" and "Tough but understanding teachers who always challenged me to go to a higher level of learning."
2.	Challenging and interesting courses, including AP courses. (25)
3.	Quality academic programs. (12)
4.	Friendly/supportive atmosphere/environment. (10)
5.	Other motivated students to work with. (10)
6.	Small class sizes. (10)
7.	Parental support. (6)
8.	Good number of opportunities (educational and technological). (6)
9.	Flexibility to take some courses at public school and some at home. (4)
10.	Funds to enhance programs. (2)
11.	Plethora of extracurricular activities. (2)
12.	The addition of new technology. (2)
13.	Personal attention. (2)
14.	Good administrators who are encouraging and care about students. (2)

Other:

Unique schedule. (1)
Unique and interesting teaching styles of teachers. (1)
Independent study—the chance to learn self-motivation. (1)
Dress code and rules that contribute to a disciplined atmosphere conducive to education. (1)

What are the most important detractors from the quality of education in your high school? By contrast, student respondents were able to identify those areas that detracted from quality in their high schools. By inference, this list represents a number of items that need fixing.

Rank	Most Important Detractors, Numbers for Each Response
1.	Bad teachers. (27). 36 percent of respondents listed this factor first. Descriptors used by respondents to reveal the intensity of this item: "apathetic," "lethargic," "been in the system too long," "no longer able to make the effort," "protected by unions," and "still learning themselves."
2.	Lack of student interest/motivation. (12)
3.	Too many mandatory courses/requirements, not enough time for electives. (9)
4.	Too large class size. (9)
5.	Disruptive students. (8)
6.	Too much emphasis on athletics. (6)
7.	Facilities/equipment/computer labs that don't function. (6)
8.	Not enough teachers. (5)
9.	Lowering of standards to encourage sub-par students to graduate. (5)
10.	Lack of innovation by teachers and students. (4)
11.	Decreasing the honors/AP courses offered in school. (4)
12.	Personal stress, not enough time, etc. (3)
13.	Weak departments within the school. (3)
14.	Homework that is monotonous, repetitive. (3)
15.	Crowded, noisy atmosphere. (3)
16.	Lack of funding for certain programs. (3)
17.	"Giving grades" is not representative of the quality of work. (3)
18.	Petty issues, such as dress code rules. (2)
19.	Students who do not see the value of school. (2)
20.	Inadequate number of counselors—they spend more time on scheduling than on students' futures. (2)

Other:

Negative media coverage of I.P.S. (1)
Bad influences in schools—drugs, crime—that retard education progress. (1)

Treating all students the same; failing to recognize differences among students. (1)
P.E. requirement, even though I'm an athlete. (1)
Too many activities are offered. (1)
Low attendance rates and poor enforcement of attendance problems. (1)
Administrative policy which suffocates freedom, honor and integrity. (1)
Lack of parental involvement. (1)
Administrators can't do anything about bad teachers because of the union. (1)

What are the three top changes you would make to improve the quality of elementary/secondary education in Indiana? This question yielded more than 200 specific suggestions to improve quality. An analysis of the responses reveals four major "change clusters" that student respondents would implement: improving the quality of teachers; making significant curriculum changes; improving resources available to education; and setting tougher academic and behavioral standards.

1. Improving the quality of teachers (57)

Bring in better teachers. (23)
More rigorous training and standards for teachers. (6)
More pay and benefits for teachers to attract better ones. (6)
Permit teachers to be more flexible to be creative. (5)
Hire enthusiastic teachers who are willing to reach out to students. (3)
Give teachers more freedom to teach. (3)
Make teachers more accountable. (3)
More acknowledgement of teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty. (2)
Less emphasis on teacher tenure. (2)
Abolish teachers' unions. (2)
Incentives given to teachers who improve themselves. (1)
Eliminate requirement of teachers in public schools to have an education degree. (1)

2. Making significant curriculum changes (64)

Begin more vigorous curriculum earlier [reading skills in kindergarten; high school-type curriculum earlier; more mathematics earlier, faster; arts, foreign languages, reading in early grades; honors courses in younger grades]. (15)
Less emphasis on "standards" and more on learning and exploration. (8)
Group students together with similar learning pace and ability. (6)
Less emphasis on athletics. (5)
Motivate students by diversifying curriculum choices. (4)
More emphasis on really trying to integrate technology into education in useful ways. (3)

Remove all unnecessary testing from classrooms. (3)
Allow students to excel: teach to the top of the class, not the bottom. (3)
Offer more advanced courses. (2)
Revamp the lesson plans to be more current. (2)
Less repetitive homework. (2)
Start kindergarten full-day, at age 4/5. (2)
Improve/provide for more independent study opportunities. (2)
More rewards for academics rather than sports. (1)
Take away the calculators. (1)
Less homework and more classwork. (1)
More emphasis on analysis and thinking. (1)
More creative and holistic approaches to learning. (1)
More flexible class schedules. (1)
More hands-on learning—labs, field trips, etc. (1)

3. Improving resources available to education (33)

Decrease class size. (17)
Increase availability of resources, more funding for schools. (7)
Implement a voucher program to make schools more competitive. (4)
Improve school facilities. (2)
Increase technology funding. (1)
More permanent funding of the arts in school budgets. (1)
Support private schools more. (1)

4. Setting tougher academic and behavioral standards (31)

Raise standards for curriculum, testing. (18)
Hold students back until they've mastered the material. (5)
Raise the expectations for students. (3)
Require dress codes. (2)
Give teachers more authority to maintain discipline in their classrooms. (2)
Instill values, a clear sense of right and wrong, and a respect for authority. (1)

5. Miscellaneous suggestions (20)

Try to get students more interested in education. (6)
Get parents more involved in their child's education. (6)
Less administrative red tape. (4)
More control at the local level and less at the state and federal levels. (1)
Push back school starting time to 9:30 a.m. – more time to sleep. (1)
Year-round school. (1)
Split up some of the "monster schools." (1)

Education and political leaders are weighing many options to improve the quality of education. Please rank these ideas from 1 to 10, with 1 being the one you think would make the MOST difference and 10 being the one that would make the LEAST difference. Respondents were presented with 10 options currently being considered for improving the quality of education in Indiana. Students ranked the options in the order listed below. Again, the overwhelming preponderance of concern centers on improving the quality of teachers. Advocates for vouchers, annual testing or year-round school will find little support among high achievers.

Rank	Option	Mean Score
1.	Attracting and retaining better teachers	2.20
2.	Setting more rigorous academic standards	3.43
3.	Smaller class sizes	3.46
4.	Greater emphasis on certain curriculum areas (arts, math, science, etc.)	4.98
5.	Better school facilities	5.89
6.	More computers and other technology	5.94
7.	Charter schools (public schools that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools)	6.51
8.	Vouchers (which allow parents to use public funds to pay for the school of their choice)	7.17
9.	Annual testing and more emphasis on test scores	7.58
10.	Year-round school	8.06

Your educational engagement Students were asked to identify the frequency of participation (Never, Occasionally, Often, Very Often) in nine specific activities associated with their high school education. Items were patterned after an instrument currently being used in the National Survey of Student Engagement, a project designed to improve information about college students and their educational experiences. The results below tell us more about the degree to which high achievers are engaged in certain school activities. Scoring was accomplished by assigning the following score to each response: Never: 1; Occasionally: 2; Often: 3; Very Often: 4. Mean scores were then calculated, yielding a ranking of likelihood of engagement.

Rank	Activity	Mean Score
1.	Participate in extracurricular activities	3.74
2.	Ask questions in class or contribute to a discussion	3.32
3.	Use an electronic medium (Web, e-mail, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	3.07
4.	Work with other students on projects during class	2.88
5.	Make a class presentation	2.75
6.	Work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	2.61
7.	Tutor or teach other students	2.48
8.	Talk about career plans with a teacher or counselor	2.38
9.	Participate in a community project as part of a course	1.71

A number of inferences can be drawn from these results. High achievers are not to be pictured as overly bookish at the expense of participation in extracurricular activities. These students actively participate in class discussion and are wired to the technology that can assist their education. In most national studies of student engagement and success at the college level, involvement and a sense of community are closely associated with persistence and retention of successful students.

Implications for the Future

The key findings of this survey are that educational priorities should be focused primarily on attracting and retaining quality teachers in Indiana's classrooms. The importance of providing for good teachers – and the corresponding difficulties in achieving that goal – have been reinforced by the opinions recorded by 75 high-achieving Central Indiana students. Teachers are at the heart of the educational enterprise. High achievers credit good teachers as the No. 1 factor in the successes students have enjoyed. High achievers also identify bad teachers as the key detractor in quality education. Finally, high achievers list "attracting and retaining future teachers" as the first option they would recommend for policy-makers concerned with educational quality.

As important as teachers are to these students, only half have ever considered becoming a teacher, and only three out of 75 identified teaching as a specific career goal. If the pattern demonstrated in this survey is representative of all high-achieving students, it

does not bode well for the future of teacher selection. The reasons identified by these students for the "quality teacher shortage" mirror the very characteristics high achievers would desire in choosing a career in teaching themselves: better pay and more benefits; more freedom from the stress of regulations and standards; more pupils who value education and their teachers; more respect and prestige; a more positive school environment; and smaller class sizes.

This list represents a tall order for those educational and policy leaders seeking to improve education. In fact, the list may be so tall as to appear unachievable. In the alternative, the list may be ignored, and in its place lower-priority options – vouchers, year-round school, for example – are advanced for consideration, options that are more politically glamorous or represent quick fixes.

High achievers, however, are speaking out. They are saying that the priorities need to be set in ways that focus primarily on the importance of teachers.

Is anybody listening?

ENDNOTES

1. See numerous publications of the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute, "The Human Capital Retention Project."

2. National Merit Scholarship Corporation, 1999-2000 Annual Report.

3. Condition of Education, 1998. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.

4. "Plugging the Leaks in Indiana's Education Pipeline: High Achievers Speak Out." Indianapolis: USA Group Foundation, 1999; "Reforming Education in Indiana: High Achievers Speak Out," Indianapolis: USA Group Foundation, 2000.

5. "Graduate Migration from Indiana's Postsecondary Institutions," Indianapolis: Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute, 1999.

APPENDIX

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